CBS Role in 1966 Haiti Invasion 'Plot' Unfolded on Hill

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It sounds at first like a comic-opera cross-pollination of James Bond and Marshall McLuhan. For emample:

• Under the eye of a Columbia Broadcasting System camera, a Haitian exile priest calmly describes his plot to bomb the palace of his homeland's dictator, Francois Duvalier, when the great invasion takes place.

• A cameraman assigned to the filming gets worried and promptly contacts the FBI and the Central Intelligence Agency.

• The CBS expert on gun-smuggling and Carribean invasion plans turns out to be an informant for the CIA while he is accepting about $6,400 in fees from the network.

• One of the prospective invaders loses an eye when his training rifle explodes—on camera—and he later extracts a $15,000 damage settlement from CBS, which already has paid his medical bills.

These and assorted other bizarre details emerged yesterday from a House Commerce subcommittee's investigation of the CBS role in an alleged plot to invade Haiti in 1966 and 1967.

Congressmen accused network executives, among other things, of manufacturing news events, meddling in foreign affairs, and possibly urging others to commit criminal acts.

"This is another instance of creating news and encouraging a criminal act," declared Rep. Paul G. Rogers (D-Fla.). "This was an inspired invasion to get some documentary film."

CBS News Vice President William L. Leonard and Perry Wolff, an executive news producer, insisted the episode was an aborted foray into investigative reporting that flopped. "We never staged anything," insisted Leonard.

It began in 1966 when a CBS producer-reporter, Jay McMullen, set out to film a gun-smuggling report and ran into a supposed plot by exile Cubans and Haitians to invade Haiti. He filmed shots of exiles plotting around a dinner table, of guns being transported to Miami, and of the "invaders" being trained to shoot ancient rifles somewhere in Florida.

The subcommittee, which has held secret hearings before, claimed many of those filmed have testified they received payments for their part and were considered "employes" of CBS.

According to Rep. John E. Moss (D-Calif.), McMullen's assistant on the job, Anthony St. George, testified in closed session that there was an understanding the refugees filmed could be paid in cash.

The CBS executives replied some of the men were paid normal cash "releases" for being filmed, that CBS did pay consultant fees to an arms dealer named Mitchell WerBell, and financed a $1,500 trip to the Dominican Republic for some refugees and a film crew.

But, asked if CBS paid money to promote an invasion it could film, Leonard replied firmly, "No sir."

Besides, Leonard replied, the project was canceled and the film never broadcast. He had written a memo in late 1966 declaring that it all amounted merely to the "non-adventures of a rag-tag crew that would even make Duvalier look good."

The network executives were criticized for playing along with what might have been an invasion of another country from American soil, contrary to U.S. foreign policy. Leonard said he had understood that certain people in the U.S. government were aware of the invasion corps anyway.

Outside the hearing room later, McMullen, the producer, told reporters that some scenes had indeed been faked by his assistant, St. George, whom he had promptly fired. He insisted also that the government must have known something of the affair because the Georgia arms dealer, WerBell, was discovered to be in touch with the CIA in Miami.

However, Moss insisted he had discovered that the CIA knew nothing of the operation.

"When news becomes such a valuable commodity that it has to be manufactured and involves relations with other countries, it breaches any bounds of reasonableness," Moss declared.

Rogers added: "I'm convinced that CBS helped to stage this, after listening to the evidence."